

# MLTW 2015 Inspiration: R. David Lankes and New Narratives for Librarians

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## **MLTW Inspiration: R. David Lankes and New Narratives for Librarians**

Written by Michael F. Moore, December 11, 2015

At the Military Libraries Training Workshop, the opening speaker was the most inspiring, with a message of how to develop new narratives to tell our stories.

1. David Lankes, professor at the Syracuse University iSchool, presented the idea that sometimes narratives get in the way of our work. His main example was the difference between narratives in Ferguson, MO: the narrative of police in camouflage outfits with mine resistant vehicles invading a town; and the narrative of a library with a sign posted saying “stay strong Ferguson – we are family,” providing teachers, food, and support to their community.

He presented three outdated narratives that information professionals should consider changing. Here are brief descriptions of these three, as well as the new narratives he recommends to replace them. My descriptions pale in comparison to what David presented.

### Outdated Narrative 1: **Library Users Consume**

Words such as “customer” and “user” imply a passive, transactional experience. A better narrative is “**Libraries as Communities**,” which uses words such as “community” and “member” to imply a group of people working together as allies and neighbors.

### Outdated Narrative 2: **Libraries define Librarians:**

Implying that the library does our work minimizes the value of the individuals making libraries successful. Also, definitions of libraries are outdated, yet we let those definitions stay in place. David’s new definitions provide valuable updates to our narrative:

- **Librarian: The Mission of Librarians is to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation within their communities**
- **Library: a mandated and facilitated space supported by the community, stewarded by librarians, and dedicated to knowledge creation.**

### Outdated Narrative 3: **Neutrality Equals Trust**

Librarianship is a profession with a strong set of values, including service, learning, intellectual freedom and safety, and intellectual honesty. However, these values do not require complete neutral, unbiased information. He pointed to the difference between presenting two sides of the

Climate Change discussion as equal, vs. presenting one side as supported by 99% of scientific research, and the other side as barely supported. We should ensure that the value of our analysis and knowledge is included in our products.

Thus, the old narratives of customers, libraries, and neutrality led to passive people accessing passive services, while the new narratives of **members, librarians, and intellect lead to learners improving with partners.**

David ended with a new narrative for society: changing the outdated narrative that “to be safe and secure, we need to surrender liberties,” into the new narrative of **security through knowledge**, the freedom of learning, and getting rid of “the unknown” by learning about it to make it known. This can lead to stronger inclusive communities where neighbor knows and respects neighbor.

David’s talk was exciting and inspiring, and many presentations and conversations throughout the Training Workshop echoed his ideas and his language. I’m looking at the narratives I use to talk about my work and my services, and I look forward to enhancing them with new language and new narratives.

Some of David’s research will be made available to DMIL members, so that we can use it to help improve our narratives: announcements of its availability will be made through the DMIL blog and email lists in the near future.

Attendees – are you changing your narratives based on what you heard in David’s talk? Others – do you see ways that David’s message can apply to the stories you tell about your work?